

A Trip to Vienna

There was a young man in his thirties who lived with his mother in the same apartment house as my mother. Laci was his name and he drove his own taxi for a living. It is a difficult way to making a living as the competition is fierce and with crime on the rise, passengers need to be scrutinized.

My Mother and his mother had a unique and clever way of communicating with each other. Even though both households had a telephone, they chose an alternate method because each phone call cost money. Both the front door and the kitchen door leading to the outside had windows that opened for ventilation. To prevent entry through the window, metal bars were installed. My Mother used Laci's services quite often, mostly to go to the cemetery to "visit" people, so when she wanted to go she wrapped a red cloth around one of the bars. Laci and his mother were much more mobile than my mother and as is customary in Budapest (and all other cities, I suppose), grocery shopping is done every day. That way the items are fresh and they don't take up room in the fridge. My Mother lived on the first floor, Laci on the fifth, in the opposite corner from my mother. As they walked to the elevator they could look across the courtyard and see the red signal and would stop to see what she needed.

During our many visits we got acquainted with Laci and his mother and hired him many times for trips to the cemetery. My Mother was not able to use public transportation anymore and even if she could, she would not be able to walk the mile to the grave.

Once we hired Laci to take us to Vienna, Austria, while my mother stayed behind. There was an interesting situation during this time in Hungary. Permission was given recently to travel abroad more freely and bring appliances back. These were not available for purchase in Hungary then. As we were nearing the border, we saw more and more cars with appliances strapped to their roof. Most of these cars were Trabants, manufactured in East Germany. They had a fiberglass body, hardly any suspension, with their tiny two-stroke engine producing 28 horsepower. They sounded like a coffee-grinder and stunk to high heaven and couldn't get out of their own way. The pollution killed many trees in Budapest and they were finally outlawed a few years later. Strapping even a small refrigerator on the roof made them very top-heavy and some of them ended up in ditches trying to negotiate a sharp curve.

Just on this side of the border, tens of prostitutes lined the side of the road, looking for any money not spent on appliances, I suppose. Before too long, we arrived at the end of the long line of cars trying to cross into Austria. Everyone shut their engine down, as the wait was long enough. I have observed this before in Budapest while being driven in a taxi.

When it was time to move up, instead of starting the engine, they actually pushed the cars by hand, to not waste fuel.

We had a great time in Vienna. I enjoyed seeing the same sights again after all those years (I lived in Vienna in 1957) and showing them to Mary. It was a hot day and I was beginning to smell from the sweat. We ducked into a high-priced store and bought a stick of antiperspirant made by Aramis. We both loved its aroma, and it did the job. Once we came back to America, I asked Mary to find it for me.

She did and I continued to use that brand for many a decade. Some family members still can't understand why I am willing to pay so much for it.